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A Swedish Colony in Gove County, KS

F. Ray Lewis*

Kansas has been fortunate to have had many foreign immigrants settle within the state. One of the largest groups were the Swedes. Much has been written about Lindsborg, the largest and the most famous Swedish settlement in Kansas. There were other large Swedish settlements around Scandia (Republic County), in northern Riley and Pottawatomie counties, and in Osage County. And there were smaller Swedish settlements scattered throughout the state. In the northwest portions there were Swedish settlements in six counties - Rawlins, Decatur, Wallace, Logan, Trego and Gove.

As the line of permanent settlement advanced westward, the 1880s saw the formation and development of the counties of western Kansas. The year of 1886 was a "boom year" in particular. W.P.Harrington, in his history of Gove County, wrote: "The prairies were dotted with schooners, emigrants were coming in by the hundreds". In April, the *Gove County Gazette* estimated that new settlers were arriving at the rate of fifty per day. Men stood in line for days at the Land Office in WaKeeney waiting their turn to file their claims".¹

The most visible remains of the Swedish settlement once located in southern Gove County, is the "Old Swede Church". Located ten miles north of Healy, the church has stood as a sentinel on the north slope of the Smoky Hill River since 1887. Inscribed in a stone above the arched doorway is the abbreviation for "Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1887".

In 1885 a few Swedish families homesteaded in southwestern Gove County, near the Smoky Hill River.² That disastrous winter, particularly January 1886, halted the immigration temporarily, but the rush resumed stronger than ever in the spring of that year. By the end of 1886 there were many Swedish families located in eastern Lewis

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Township and western Jerome Township from Plum Creek to the north and Salt Creek to the south.

Ralph L. Criswell, editor of the *Gove County Gazette* in Gove City, visited the Swedish settlement in July of 1886, and wrote the following enthusiastic report on the area: "Last Friday we visited the Swede colony in the southwest part of the county, and was (?) surprised to find the county so thickly settled and showing so much evidence of thrift and prosperity. Town[ships] 14 and 15 in Ranges 30 and 31 and the west half of 14 and 15 in [Range] 29 are settled almost exclusively by Swedes from Illinois and the eastern part of Kansas. They are a thrifty people and make good citizens, and where they are found, prosperity abounds. The colony is located in the beautiful country traversed by the Smoky River, the soil is rich, good water is found everywhere at a depth from 9 to 40 feet, good sand is found along the river, and fine building stone in the bluffs. A little vacant land yet remains but it will soon be taken, we presume, by other Swedes".³ Most of these Swedes were born and raised in Sweden and had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1860s and 1870s, settling in Illinois and various other midwestern states.

The country the Swedes settled was virgin, open prairie. Only eighteen years before, Indians had been a menace to the travelers along the Smoky Hill Trail. This was the same trail the Butterfield Overland Dispatch used in the latter 1860s on its route from Atchison to Denver and the gold mines of Colorado. It passed through the middle of the Swedish colony - the ruts are still visible in some places. The famous Monument Rocks (commonly called "The Kansas Pyramids") are located a few miles west of the Swedish colony.

One of the first things the Swedes did after arriving, was to establish religious services. As Alfred Bergin wrote in *The Smoky Valley in the After Years*: "The settlers in Kansas were not strangers to the privations and burdens of pioneer life, because most of them had experienced this kind of life in Illinois and other places before they came here. They had been members of Swedish Lutheran congregations elsewhere, so were very desirous to form a congregation and build a church where God's Word would be presented and the sacraments administered".⁴ The Gove County Swedes organized their congregation in 1886.

At first they met in each other's homes. "Louis Nordling will preach to the Swedes next Sunday at the residence of August Anderson".⁵ But it was not long before they began building a church.

Early in 1887, all of the Swedish neighbors joined in and began to construct their place of worship. They quarried the stone from the nearby rock formations and built a one-room, unadorned structure which was sufficiently adequate for their needs.

Francis E. Ruch, son of Rudolph Ruch , who built the pews, the altar and pulpit for the church, and Annie Peterson Ruch, a local Swedish girl, described in vivid detail the interior of the edifice: "The walls were finished with a coat of plaster of Paris, which was very smooth and white. The ceiling was arched and the wooden boards were painted a light blue. Two large round kerosene burner lamps, which were lowered and raised with a short pole, hung from the curved wooden ceiling.

"The pews were on either side of the aisle and fronted north. As was the custom of that time, the men sat on one side of the aisle, and the women on the other side.

"Above the pulpit on the north was inscribed the motto: 'Peace on earth, good will towards men'. in letters about eight or ten inches high. A large pot belly stove was used for heating, and a bucket and dipper were on a bench at the side of the door".⁶

When considering a name for their new church and congregation, the Biblical name of Sharon was suggested. Sharon was a fertile plan on the west coast of Palestine in the Holy Land, extending from Carmel to Jaffa and renowned for its richness and beauty. The name is also associated with a flower, "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valley" from the *Song of Solomon*, Chapter 2, Verse 1. The name for Sharon in Swedish is Saron and that was the name the congregation chose for its church name.

The small church prospered as the Swedish settlement grew. In 1887, according to the Kansas State Department of Agriculture statistics, the membership of the church was 94 and the church property was valued at \$800.00. In 1888 the Saron congregation was accepted as as member of the Kansas Conference of the Augustana Lutheran Synod. It is through this organization that the only official records of the Saron body have been found

The Saron Congregation never had a resident pastor. Clergymen came by train from Lindsborg and other Swedish communities in central Kansas. They usually came once a month for eagerly awaited services. In the interim periods, members of the congregation took

turns conducting the services and sermons were read from the pulpit. The Sunday School was very active; a youth group was formed and the confirmation classes studied Luther's Catechism. All of the services - sermons, hymns and studies, all were conducted in Swedish.

The parishioners felt warmly for their pastors. John E. Soderstrom, a member of the Saron Congregation, shared his feelings about Pastor Olson in a letter to his daughter: "I remember when Pastor Carl O. Olson passed away. It was one of the first years I lived in western Kansas (1889). We were informed of his death by a pastor from Lindsborg. After the Sunday service we went out on the prairie and gathered flowers to decorate the church. We made two large wreaths and hung them over the altar. Pastor Olson was loved by the congregation and will always be my favorite pastor".⁷

The ladies of the church organized the "Fruentimmers Syförening", meaning literally the "The Ladies' Sewing Society". Several times during the year, they gathered in each other's homes for a "sewing bee". Then, once a year, they held a sale to raise money for the church. In 1900, the *Gove County Gazette* reported: "At a Sewing Circle sale held at M. J. O. Lewis' last Monday, the proceeds amounted to over \$57.00. The Society generally holds a sale or an auction annually and the proceeds are used for some charitable purpose. We understand that the proceeds derived from this last sale will be sent to famine stricken sufferers in India".⁸

For years the Swedish Lutheran Church held a special Christmas program. This famous county-wide event was anticipated each year not only by the Swedish community, but by the residents of the entire area. All members of the church participated in this program. The children each had their part - a song to sing, a Christmas saying, or a Biblical recitation. Lois Anderson Verhoeff remembers: "All of us children had to speak a piece and were scared to death. We also sang Christmas carols in Swedish. I learned them but could not remember them now".⁹ The church was decorated with candles on the window sills and a large tree was trimmed with strings of popcorn and cranberries, paper chains, painted nuts and candles.

Throughout the years many christenings, weddings and funerals were conducted in the church. Being the only community building, it was also used on Wednesday nights for Literary. A small cemetery was located on a hill one half mile north of the church. About twenty people are buried there.

According to records in the Register of Deeds Office at the Gove County Court House a total of 121 Swedish families "proved up" on their homesteads in the Swedish colony.¹⁰ That meant that they had met the requirements of the Homestead Act by living continuously on the land for five years and making improvements on their homesteads. There were others who left before "proving up".

A variety of circumstances combined to deplete the colony. Poor soil (despite earlier optimistic reports), several consecutive years of low rainfall, difficulty in locating good wells and lastly horse disease. Settlers began moving away and so many people had left by 1916 that the congregation decided to disband. The church building continued being of service as a community non-denominational church until after 1920, when F.A.Lewis and some other men representing the remaining Swedes, sold the church to John Beltz and gave the money to the local Red Cross chapter. The building was converted into a dwelling and used by men when farming the surrounding fields. In recent years the building has stood vacant. Vandals have broken and shot out windows and ransacked the interior. Time and weather have also taken their toll. The roof is sadly in need of repair and the protective coat of cement applied by a recent owner has not prevented the stone from crumbling.

Approaching its 105th year, the "Old Swede Church" stands empty and desolate, with window panes broken and holes in the roof, a symbol of the struggle those early Swedish settlers endured. A struggle with the stubborn and unyielding soil, poor wells and years of drought. But the church also harbors happy and joyous memories - christenings, confirmations, weddings and church gatherings. When you see "The Old Swede Church" today, think of those Swedes who loved their old church.

Notes

¹ W.P. Harrington, *History of Gove County, Kansas* (Gove City, KS), Reprint 1973.

² Alfred Bergin, "Swedish Settlements in Central Kansas" in *Kansas State Historical Collections*, 1909-1910, Vol. XI (Topeka, KS 1910).

³ *Gove County Gazette*, Vol. I, No.15, 16 July 1886 (Gove City, KS).

⁴ Alfred Bergin, *The Smoky Valley in the After Years* (Lindsborg, KS 1919).
Translated by Ruth Bildt. (Lindsborg, KS 1969).

⁵ *Gove City Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1886.

⁶ Letter from Francis E. Ruch, dated Goldendale, WA 7 April 1974.

⁷ Letter from Emma Soderstrom Erickson, dated Minneapolis, MN 30 Oct. 1971.

⁸ *Gove County Gazette*, 27 April 1900.

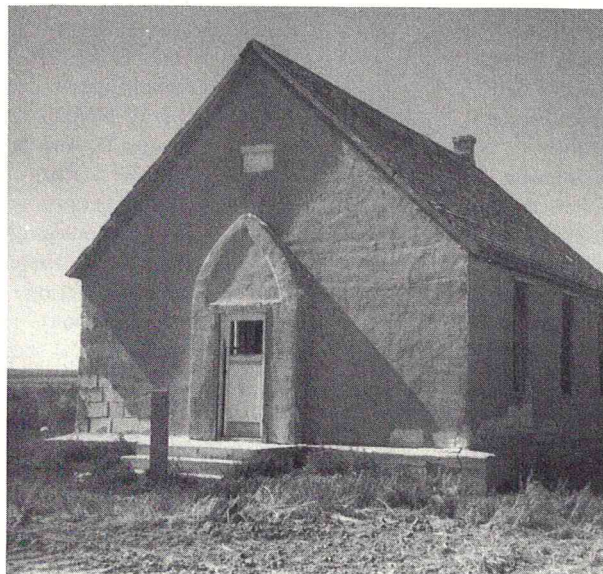
⁹ Letter from Lois Anderson Verhoeff, dated Littleton, CO 19 June 1969.

¹⁰ The names of the Swedes who "proved up" are listed here as follows:

Andrew Gustafson	Brita Anderson
Peter A. Johnson	Charles O. Holmgren
Sophia Youngdahl	John Y. Johnson
Theodore Hanson	Magnus Henry Lundquist
John August Munson	Huldah C. Lundgren
Nicholas A. Olson	Nels L. Nelson
Olof Ohlund	Gustaf L. Pearson
Julius A. Nelson	Swan Peterson
Carl John Oscar Lindvall	Andrew Peterson
John A. Olson	John P.W. Johnson
Olif Peterson	Nels Olson
Minnie Peterson	Andrew Hanson
Anna Lillia	Brita Thoren
John A. Palmquist	Swan Youngdahl
Nicolaus Nilson	Olof A. Osburg
Theodore H. Thoren	Thure E. Nordell
Charles P. Nordell	Alfred Lillia
Anders Westergren	Nils W. Nordell
Olof Hedman	Charles D. Anders
Andrew Johnson	John W. Selberg
Carl J. Nordell	Olof Nyberg
Lena Peterson	John E. Soderstrom
John Oscar Lewis	Swan A. Anderson
Peres E. Anderson	James C. Nelson
Niles A. Nilsson	John E. Olson
Anders J. Sandberg	Andrew P. Oakberg
Pehr J. Peterson	James C. Peterson
Huldah M. Swanson	Charles J. Nelson
Hans Lindborg	Gust Hedberg
Louis Nordling	Niles Larson
John A. Velen	Charles V. Larson
Anna S. Johnson	Maria A. Johnson
Emma C. Soderstrom	Albert J. Anderson
John Lofgren	Charles L. Swanson
John A. Johnson	Victor Anderson
Claus W. Swanson	Francis August Lewis
Mattis Peterson	Olof Olson
Peter R. Moller	Amelia Anna Moller
August Danielson	Mons Pehrson
Rasmus A. Möller	Erik Johnson

William Johnson
Emil Theodore Lewis
Neils Moller
Frank Elmer Anderson
Adolph F. Ekstrom
Frank Fagerberg
Carl M. Swanson
Swan Emburg
Charles Alfred Anderson
Anders Anderson
Ernest Christenson
John Tillson
Lena Lund
Miles Christianson
Charles M. Nelson
John A. Hanson
Peter Youngdahl
Charles Benson
Olof Bergstrum
George W. Hanson
Nils Nelson

Charles O. Tilberg
Swan August Johnson
John E. Larson
Thorvald K. Moller
Edward Julius Lundgren
Ida Carlson
Charles Pearson
Minnie Josephine Cartwright
Clarence R. Pearson
Charles A. Carlson
Carolina Johnson
Nils Johnson
Peter Edling
Nels G. Nelson
Andrew Tillson
John Lindquist
Swan O. Holmquist
David Johnson
Erik Nyberg
Peter Anderson



The Saron Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Gove County, Kansas. Founded in 1887 it is known as "Old Swedes Church".